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Committee on Conferences
Substantive session of 2000

Draft report

Addendum

Rapporteur: Mr. Peter **Van De Velde** (Belgium)

I. Calendar of conferences and meetings

C. Utilization of conference-servicing resources and facilities

4. Improved coordination of conference services

Introduction and overview

1. At its substantive session of 1995, the Committee on Conferences decided to consider, on a biennial basis, the means to ensure improved coordination of conference services within the United Nations system. Moreover, it requested Conference Services to maintain an active dialogue with the substantive secretariats of intergovernmental bodies, providing statistics and information on previous performance, as well as guidelines on ways and means to enhance the utilization of conference-servicing resources. At its substantive session of 1996, the Committee endorsed the idea of the Secretariat to make the active dialogue a permanent coordination feature and had directed that such action should be taken at Headquarters, as well as at the United Nations Office at Geneva and the United Nations Office at Vienna.

2. In addition, in paragraph 15 of its resolution 51/211 A of 18 December 1996, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to ensure closer cooperation between Headquarters, the United Nations Office at Geneva, the United Nations Office at Vienna and the United Nations Office at Nairobi in order to improve the coordination of conference services. In paragraph 16 of the same resolution, the Assembly requested the Secretariat to engage on a regular basis in an active dialogue with Member States as a permanent feature at Headquarters, as well as at the United Nations offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, in order to improve the coordination of conference services.

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3. Moreover, at its substantive session of 1998, the Committee requested the Secretary-General to review administrative instruction ST/AI/342 on guidelines for the preparation of host Government agreements falling under General Assembly resolution 40/243 of 18 December 1985, so as to reflect the new organizational structure, which allowed for more effective coordination among the four United Nations conference-servicing centres in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, with a view to determining the most cost-effective option for the Organization, while ensuring the required standard of services. That request was reiterated in paragraph 37 of General Assembly resolution 53/208 A of 18 December 1998.

4. At its 431st meeting, on 8 August 2000, the Committee on Conferences held a videoconference, in which the Chief of Conference Services of the United Nations Office at Nairobi, the Officer-in-Charge of Administrative and Common Services and the Chief of the Translation and Editorial Service of the United Nations Office at Vienna, the Acting Director of the Conference Services Division of the United Nations Office at Geneva and other relevant managers at the respective duty stations participated. The Committee also considered the matter at its 432nd meeting, on 8 August 2000.

5. At its 432nd meeting, on 8 August 2000, the Committee also considered an oral report on the matter.

Discussion

6. In his introductory statement to the videoconference, the Chief of Conference Services of the United Nations Office at Nairobi said that the high level of enthusiasm of the staff, and the close coordination between the various departments, contributed to the centre's success. The proposal to separate conference services from administration would further enhance the profile of conference services.

7. In his introductory statement during the videoconference, the Officer-in-Charge of Administrative and Common Services and Chief of the Translation and Editorial Service of the United Nations Office at Vienna said that, although uneven, the workload trend for the various meeting services at the United Nations Office at Vienna, including translation and interpretation services, was generally upward. The potential for further efficiency gains at the duty station had been mostly exhausted and there were now increasing concerns about the quality of output and the need to find the right balance between budgetary resources and workload. Constraints included uneven workload distribution, late requests and modifications to and cancellations of requests, an unfavourable post structure that did not offer attractive career prospects to staff and the imbalance between workload and available personnel and budgetary resources.

8. Questions were asked about the current level of user satisfaction with the optical disk system, the overall vacancy rate, the experience of the Office with the use of temporary assistance during peak periods and the reasons for the high vacancy rates at the United Nations Office at Vienna.

9. In replying to the questions raised, the Officer-in-Charge of Administrative and Common Services and Chief of the Translation and Editorial Service of the United Nations Office at Vienna said that there had been improvements in the performance of the optical disk system at the procedural level, but no change in the platform used. On the subject of the vacancy rate, by the end of 2000 the vacancy

rate for translators was expected to decline to 2.2 per cent, but little change was expected in the situation regarding interpreters. The Office looked forward to the cooperation of Headquarters in that area.

10. The Chief of the Interpretation and Meetings Section added that none of the interpreter posts at the United Nations Office at Vienna matched the job description of a P-3 interpreter. Posts would have to be reclassified if there was to be any hope of attracting and retaining qualified candidates.

11. The Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services added that the lack of incentives and career prospects also helped to explain the high vacancy rates at the United Nations Office at Vienna, as the conditions there were not as attractive as in New York and Geneva. Efforts were continuing, however, to make the duty station more attractive to staff by providing incentives and implementing the system of managed assignments.

12. The Acting Director of the Conference Services Division of the United Nations Office at Geneva prefaced her introductory remarks by commenting further on the situation of vacancy rates for United Nations language professionals in general. She said that the problem must be viewed in terms of supply and demand in the market for such services. Interpreters, particularly those interpreting from Russian into French and English, were in very short supply and the Organization should urgently consider mounting its own training programmes to ensure a steady supply of suitable candidates.

13. Coordination between conference services and the bodies that they served was absolutely essential, particularly at the decision-making and operational levels. A good example of such coordination was the development of a single Internet web site to provide information on the meetings of all international bodies in Geneva scheduled to be held in a given quarter. A daily calendar of meetings was already available.

14. Inter-agency coordination was best reflected in the sharing of common services, notably in the area of publishing, between the various agencies of the United Nations system based in Geneva.

15. The Chief of the Technological Innovations Programme Section at the United Nations Office at Geneva added that the introduction of technological innovations had greatly enhanced the efficiency of the Office's operations. The latest version of the DRITS system, for example, had become a valuable management tool. Speech recognition programmes had been successfully tested and a number of them were currently in use in the various translation services.

16. Questions were asked about the potential for common services in areas other than publishing in Geneva and whether it was planned to embark on a new experiment in remote interpretation between Geneva and Nairobi and, if so, within what time frame.

17. Information was provided to the effect that publishing was the activity that best lent itself to inter-agency coordination. It was a clear product with clear competition from non-United Nations sources and a great deal of duplication existed in that area among United Nations bodies.

18. A number of members expressed concern both at the apparent inability of the Organization to attract and retain qualified language professionals and at the low

percentage of candidates who passed the competitive language examinations. It was suggested that consideration be given to the organization of internal training programmes for potential candidates for recruitment. Other members suggested that a comprehensive study should be carried out of all aspects of the situation of language professionals in the United Nations system, including remuneration and conditions of service.

Conclusions and recommendations

19. The Committee on Conferences took note of the oral report by the Secretariat on improved coordination of conference services.

20. The Committee encouraged efforts to promote a more coordinated approach within Conference Services aimed at providing services from all duty stations more effectively and efficiently.

21. The Committee welcomed the inclusion of the videoconference as an integral part of its session and looked forward to similar conferences in the future.

22. The Committee requested the Secretary-General to submit a report to the General Assembly as soon as possible analysing such problems as may exist related to recruitment in language services at all duty stations and proposing actions to address them.

23. The Committee invited the Secretary-General to further develop the system of incentives to attract language staff to duty stations with high vacancy rates and to report on the measures taken under the new system.

24. The Committee requested that it be kept informed of the workload statistics at the various duty stations.

25. The Committee looked forward to the revision of administrative circular ST/AI/342.